

C. Modern Europe and America

A revival of interest in the Christian commemoration of martyrs arose in the context of totalitarian dictatorships in the 20th century. The 20th century has even been called “the century of martyrs” (Ringshausen). This is true for the Protestant and Orthodox churches in particular. The Roman Catholic Church has a prolonged history of venerating martyrs, who are regarded as prototypes of saints and venerated accordingly. Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758) established the three basic criteria of the Roman Catholic Church for the process of beatification or canonization that continue to be applied today: 1. a violent death (*martyrium materialiter*); 2. the persecutors’ motive of hatred of faith or hatred of the church (*martyrium formaliter ex parte tyranni*); 3. the victim’s conscious acceptance of God’s will even at the risk of their life (*martyrium formaliter ex parte victimae*).

The Second Vatican Council reduced the number of festivals of saints, but Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) canonized more saints than had ever occurred during the entire previous history of the Church. John Paul II also emphasized the commemoration of the neo-martyrs of the 20th century. He invoked “a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1994, No. 37). At a commemoration service for martyrs held at the Colosseum in Rome on May 7, 2000, John Paul II honored Protestant minister Paul Schneider, who was murdered at Buchenwald concentration camp in 1939, and also encouraged local churches to compile catalogues of martyrs in the 20th century. The German martyrology currently includes more than 1,000 biographical sketches, which include the controversial “purity ordeals” (i.e., preferring to be killed rather than to lose one’s virginity [Möll]).

Shortly after 1945, a renewed interest in the commemoration of martyrs arose in the German Protestant church. However, it never grew beyond basic memorialization efforts, such as memorials at Brandenburg Cathedral in 1953 and Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in 1961. A book listing 499 martyrs from German-speaking areas in Europe was published in 2006 (Schulze/Kurschat). This volume uses the term ‘martyr’ to incorporate not only those who were killed because of their religious beliefs or their work within the church, but also those who were killed because their Christian faith inspired them to acts of resistance, or those who died as a result of imprisonment or torture.

Hebrews 13:7, combined with 11:35 and 12:1, is of particular importance to the commemoration of martyrs in Protestantism. Other biblical references are, among others, Matthew 5:10 and Mark 8:34. The fate of Stephen, who is considered an arch martyr (Acts 6:8–8:2; cf. 22:20) is also to be included, as well as various passages in the Revelation of John (e.g., 2:13; 11:3–13). A clearly-defined understanding of martyrdom (for example with a regulated canonization process) is unknown in Protestantism. However, the church historian Wolf-Dieter Hauschild observed that the biblical-ancient church and the Protestant-Reformation view seem to be broadly in agreement. He described four essential aspects which both positions hold in common: 1. the close relationship of the slain Christians to the crucified Christ, in whose wake they live and die (although there is a categorial difference in soteriological terms); 2. martyrs are not only evangelizers but also simple church members; 3. in addition to the witnesses of the word there are also witnesses of the act in accordance with the divine justice and God’s commandments; 4. martyrs may be honored, but not worshiped like Christ.

The Russian-Orthodox church was only able to commemorate the many victims of brutal persecutions which followed the October Revolution of 1917 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As of now, around 1,100 20th-century neo-martyrs have been canonized, roughly three times as many as in the church’s history leading up to the 20th century. Some cases are controversial, such as persons who initially collaborated but later fell victim to the regime; or the canonization of the family of the last Tsar of Russia Nicholas II in 2000, which was explicitly not intended as a political rehabilitation.

In 1998, the Anglican church unveiled ten statues of Christian martyrs of the 20th century. The statues are located above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey and represent, by way of example, martyrs from all continents and from different denominations, men and women. Among them are Martin Luther King, Jr. from the USA and Oscar Romero from El Salvador. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was introduced as a federal holiday in the USA in 1986 in order to stress the civil-religious significance of the Baptist minister and civil rights activist.

Recently, Western churches in particular have considered the ecumenical aspect of the commemoration of martyrs. Issues that are still debated include the misconduct of Christians, victims of interdenominational conflicts including the branding of individuals as heretics, and the treatment of martyrs of non-Christian denominations or faith groups. It is not always possible to determine the motivations of martyrs and their persecutors. Furthermore, it can be difficult to evaluate a situation in which a victim incurred guilt or committed suicide, for in-

stance in order to protect others. Protestant voices have always drawn attention to the risks associated with the veneration of humans. The case of Paul Schneider illustrates how complex the issue can be. Schneider has long been venerated by ecumenical Christians; however, in 2007 Folkert Rickers expressed doubts regarding Schneider's martyrdom due to his allegedly narrow worldview, and because he pushed himself toward martyrdom, thus disregarding Heb 7:27.

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